Sociology:
The ontological turn

Lafdil Hatim

Faculty of Arts and Humanities

University Mohammed V, Rabat.

hatimlafdil20012001@gmail.com

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الملخّص:

لا يخفى على الباحثين في العلوم الاجتماعية الارتفاع المتزايد للدراسات والأبحاث المرتبطة بحقل الأنطولوجيا الاجتماعية في السنوات القليلة الماضية، وفي هذا الصدد يسائل المقال طبيعة التحول الأنطولوجي داخل السوسيولوجيا، وذلك بالوقوف على الشروط الموضوعية المقترنة بهذا التحول، وعبر مناقشة المحددات التي تحكم منطق هذا التحول وغاياته، ليبرهن على أن انفتاح السوسيولوجيا على حقل الأنطولوجيا الاجتماعية يمكن اعتباره جوابا عن بعض القضايا الابستمولوجية، والمنهجية، والمفاهيمية، والتطبيقية، وكذا التناقضات التي تسكن النظرية السوسيولوجية منذ نشأتها، والمنبثقة عن تطور السوسيولوجيا والتحديات المقترنة بهذا التطور. ويقدم المقال هذا التصور من خلال فحص متأن لجذور أزمة السوسيولوجيا ومظاهرها المتعددة في الماضي والحاضر، وبتتبع مختلف الإجابات وردود الفعل التي سعت إلى تجاوز تلك الأزمة، وأثر ذلك على البحث السوسيولوجي. ليخلص المقال في نهاية التحليل إلى أن جزءا من الأزمة الحالية في السوسيولوجيا يمكن أن يجد حلا من خلال البناء الأنطولوجي للوقائع الاجتماعية والمفاهيم المرتبطة بها، بالموازاة مع البناء الإبستيمولوجي والمنهجي، وهو ما يتأكد من خلال الوقوف على أهم النماذج والأطر النظرية في حقل الأنطولوجيا الاجتماعية، وهي النماذج والأطر التي تكشف لنا فعليا عن الآفاق العلمية الحقيقية التي تفتحها الأنطولوجيا الاجتماعية أمام السوسيولوجيا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأنطولوجيا الاجتماعية، أزمة السوسيولوجيا، التحول الأنطولوجي، مفهوم الواقع الاجتماعي.

Abstract:

The last few years have seen a surge of interest in social ontology. In this article I discuss this ontological turn, in relation to sociology, and I argue that this ontological turn is a response to some epistemological, methodological, conceptual and practical problems, as well as contradictions that arise as sociology faces new challenges. To achieve the objectives of the current inquiry, the problem of sociology crisis is primarily tackled, and thus, its history and different aspects in the past and the present will be highlighted through analysing the reactions to the crisis, the other turns in sociology and their impact on sociological research.

To this end, the relevance of the ontological turn and its possible role in sociological research are scrutinised. Accordingly, an exposition of the most representative models and theories in social ontology is introduced at the end of the analysis to demonstrate that social ontology open new avenues and perspectives to sociology to address those challenges and presents a condition of possibility that is necessary to overcome the sociology crisis.

Key words: Social ontology, sociology crisis, ontological turn, social reality.

1- Introduction:

Recent years have witnessed an increased interest in social ontology research. I here discuss this ontological turn in sociology[1], and I argue that after waves of epistemological and methodological disruption in history of sociology[2], this ontological turn[3] is a response to some theoretical, conceptual and practical problems, as well as contradictions that arise as general sociology faces new challenges. The questions at the heart of this ontological turn are not concerned with the "really real" nature of the social world, which means they are not purely metaphysical or philosophical in nature, but in contrary they are questions about solving epistemological and methodological problems as well as practical issues in sociology, and by the way to keep the horizon of social research perpetually open in theory and in practice, because at the end of the analysis bad ontologies always bring bad sciences. The article aims besides the questions of origins, models and theories of social ontology, to determine what social ontology can offer to the existing sociological approaches and argue that the social sciences, sociology, in particular can benefit from the application of social ontology both theoretically and methodologically.

The article is structured as follows: The first section of the article covers the problem of sociology crisis, its history and different aspects in the past and the present. The second section addresses the reactions to the crisis before the ontological turn, here I briefly discuss the other turns in sociology and their impact on sociological research; the third section is an exposition of social ontology, what is it? What is its question? What is the difference between a socio-ontological and a sociological approach? Why is the ontological turn so relevant now? What could be its role in sociological research?

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1 - Turn refers to a change in the field of scientific research, it doesn't reflect necessarily a radical change. In sociology there are some examples: cultural turn, spatial turn, relational turn, even a cognitive turn. Some traits of a turn could be introducing a novel theoretical or methodological frames or an innovative conceptualisation that opens new perspectives for research in theory and practice.

2 - There have been at least four periods in which positivism became an explicit target of critique: around the turn of the twentieth century

3 - Despite some critics: Patrik Aspers for example argues: "that there is no fundamental qualitative difference between the ontological turn and what we know as constructivism" in the article: Performing ontology Social Studies of Science 2015, Vol. 45(3) 449—453. I will address aspects of critics in the present article.

The fourth and the last section is an exposition of the most representatives models and theories in social ontology, with an analysis of their foundations and principles.

2- Sociology crisis: Background and aspects:

To say that the social sciences in general, sociology in particular, are in a state of crisis is cliché[1], Many sociologists confirms that sociology since its "inception" has met different crises[2] . In what follows, I will examine some aspects of the crisis, its roots and background, and suggest that one key to move forward in sociology is by integrating social ontological theories into sociological theorizing and research. To achieve this, I have to go back first to the relatively short history of sociology.

It all starts as a critique of traditional positivism at the beginning of the 20th century, and the situation does not seem to have changed today[3]. Positivist ideas as **Kincaid** details them: "were that philosophy should be scientific, that metaphysical speculations are meaningless, that there is a universal and a priori scientific method, that a main function of philosophy is to analyse that method, that this basic scientific method is the same in both the natural and social sciences, that the various sciences should be reducible to physics, and that the theoretical parts of good science must be translatable into statements about observations. In the social sciences … positivism has supported the emphasis on quantitative data and precisely formulated theories, the doctrines of behaviourism…and methodological individualism, the doubts among philosophers that meaning and interpretation can be scientifically adequate, and an approach to the philosophy of social science that focuses on conceptual analysis rather than on the actual practice of social research. Influential criticisms have denied that scientific method is a priori or universal, that theories can or must be translatable into

1 - Joseph Lopreato, Timothy Crippen: Crisis in Sociology: The Need for Darwin ,1st Ed, Routledge, 1999

2 - Alvin Gouldner: the coming crisis in the western sociology, Basic books, 1970 / Bourdieu Pierre : Vive la crise: For heterodoxy in social science, Theory and Society, 17, 773–787 (1988). /Abell, P. and Reyniers, D.: On the Failure of Social Theory', British Journal of Sociology 51(4) ,(2000): 739—50/ Roger Burrows, Mike Savage : The Coming Crisis of Empirical Sociology, 2007 and Roger Burrows, Mike Savage: After the crisis? Big Data and the methodological challenges of empirical sociology, 2014.

3 - George Steinmetz: Positivism and Its Others in the Social Sciences, in The politics of methods in human sciences, Positivism and Its Epistemological Others, Edited BY George Steinmetz, Duke University Press 2005, pp.1-20

observational terms, and that reduction to physics is the way to unify the sciences. These criticisms have undercut the motivations for behaviourism and methodological individualism in the social sciences"[1].

All these features become the Holy Grail of the traditional positivism in sociology as represented by the work of **Auguste Comte** and **Emile Durkheim.** The analogy with the natural sciences is clear, "The social world exists as an objective entity, outside of the mind of the observer, and in principle it is knowable in its entirety. The task of the researcher is to describe and analyse this reality. Positivist approaches share the assumption that, in natural as in social sciences, the researcher can be separated from the object and therefore observe it in a neutral way and without affecting the observed object. As in the natural sciences, there are systematic rules and regularities governing the object of study, which are also amenable to empirical research"[2].

At the end, positivism becomes an ideology, an ideology that imposes a specific ontological view about the social reality and how we should study it, the consequences were "reducing and limiting the meaning of the term social", Which leads to "live up to some beliefs, ideals or ideologies concerning scientific methods, positivists have tended to reduce their ontological understanding of social phenomena[3].

The serious thing about this is that: "the surprising longevity of positivism—especially in latent, unexamined, or unconscious forms —in the human sciences. Despite repeated attempts by social theorists and researchers to drive a stake through the heart of the vampire, the disciplines continue to experience a positivistic haunting. There is also a great deal of variation across the disciplines and historical epochs in the forms"[4].

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1 - Kincaid Harold: Positivism in the social sciences, Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Taylor and Francis, 1998. In https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/positivism-in-the-social-sciences/v-1.

2 - Donatella della Porta and Michael Keatin: How many approaches in the social sciences? An epistemological introduction, in Donatella della Porta and Michael Keating: Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences A Pluralist Perspective, Cambridge University Press 2008, pp. 19-39

3 - Hjørland, Birger, and Jenna Hartel: Afterword: Ontological, Epistemological and Sociological Dimensions of Domains. Knowledge Organization, 2003, 30(3/4). 239-245.

4 -George Steinmetz: Positivism and Its Others in the Social Sciences, in the politics of method in the human sciences, Positivism and Its Epistemological Others Duke University Press, 2005, pp.1-20

Having said that, the sociological crisis has multiple aspects:

2-1- The paradigmatic aspect:

Can we talk about a paradigm in the social sciences the same way we talk about it in physics or biology? The answer is not an easy task. Thomas Kuhn in "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions", suggested that any scientific discipline has – if the aim is the construction of an objective knowledge- to rely upon a paradigm that defines what to study, why to study it and how to study[1].

In sociology this directly refers to "social phenomena", "formulating hypotheses", and establishing "a method of doing field work". This projection into sociology is not simple as it is the case in natural sciences, soon problems emerge: what is a social phenomenon first? Why relying on explanatory hypotheses? "The terrain" is not the laboratory where you can test your hypotheses, and then what are the rules of the field work? This impinges on the problem of pluralism in theory and practice, a pluralism that quickly becomes fragmentation.

Some social scientists insist that there is only one paradigm in the social sciences. This paradigm where 'scientific research', let it be 'quantitative or qualitative', relies on inference, and it is designed to make descriptive or explanatory inferences on the bases of empirical information about the world[2]; some think that social science is pre-paradigmatic, still in search of a set of unifying principles and standards; others believe that it is post-paradigmatic, having shed a set of scientific assumptions tied to a particular conception of modernity. Finally, others believe that it is non-paradigmatic, claiming that the social world is to be understood in multiple ways, each of which may be valid for specific purposes, there no place to one hegemonic approach; or even that it is multi-paradigmatic, with different paradigms either struggling against each other or ignoring each other[3].

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1 -Donatella della Porta and Michael Keatin: How many approaches in the social sciences? An epistemological introduction, op,cit.

2 -- Donatella della Porta and Michael Keatin: How many approaches in the social sciences? An epistemological introduction, op, cit

3 - ibid

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At the end, sociologists face something similar to chaos that we call pluralism, but pluralism per se, is not a deficiency in sociology. Fragmentation is. And sociology appears to be fragmented in different ways. The paradigmatic aspect is just the beginning.

2-2- Epistemological aspects:

The second aspect of the crisis is epistemological. Epistemology is a branch of philosophy that addresses the question of the nature, sources and limits of knowledge; it is the study of knowledge and how to acquire it[1]. Epistemology is important because it influences how researchers frame their research in their attempts to discover knowledge[2]. **Katie Moon** and **Deborah Blackman** explain that epistemology is concerned with all aspects of the validity, scope and methods of acquiring knowledge, such as a) what constitutes a knowledge claim; b) how can knowledge be acquired or produced; and c) how the extent of its transferability can be assessed[3]. In the core of the epistemological issues in sociology there is the long-lasting debate between the subject and the object, the micro and the macro structure, agency and structural explanations, inductive/deductive knowledge, and the role of observation[4].

For example, where to start a sociological analysis? Here, for example, the question of the units and level of analysis is relevant[5]. While the former is concerned with the question of whether we are interested only in micro-level behaviour and infer broader social processes and change from that, or whether we can reason at the level of social wholes like institutions and classes or states, the latter, the level of analysis, is related to theories and the level at which explanations are postulated to work, the question here concerns the framework that determine the actions, the practices or the

1 - The Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Epistmology, https://iep.utm.edu/epistemo/

2 - Katie Moon and Deborah Blackman: A guide to ontology, epistemology, and philosophical perspectives for interdisciplinary researchers, published on line on 2 May 2017, in https://i2insights.org/2017/05/02/philosophy-for-interdisciplinarity/

3 - ibid

4 - Hjørland, Birger, and Jenna Hartel: Afterword: Ontological, Epistemological and Sociological Dimensions of Domains. Knowledge Organization, 2003, 30(3/4). 239-245.

5 - Donatella della Porta and Michael Keatin: How many approaches in the social sciences? An epistemological introduction, op, cit, pp.1-6

behaviours of individuals[1], For instance: "some theories argue that social entities are built out of the psychological states of individual people, while others argue that they are built out of actions, and yet others that they are built out of practices Still other theories deny that a distinction can even be made between the social and the non-social".[2]. Then what is the option: is it the rational choice theory? With an emphasis on individual self-interest, is it a socialisation theory? Is it a cultural or institutional approach? [3], whatever the choice is, it has epistemological consequences if not misfits on every phase of the research inquiry. In addition to what is stated above, **Deborah and Katie** make a peculiar distinction in the epistemological approaches; they distinguish between three main types:

- ✓ Objectivist epistemology assumes that reality exists outside, or independently, of the individual mind. Objectivist research is useful in providing reliability (consistency of results obtained) and external validity (applicability of the results to other contexts)[4].

- ✓ Constructionist epistemology rejects the idea that objective 'truth' exists and is waiting to be discovered. Instead, 'truth', or meaning, arises in and out of our interactions with the realities in our world. The 'real world' does not pre-exist independently of human activity or symbolic language[5]. Social constructionists tend to maintain that classifications are not determined by how the world is but are convenient ways to represent it. Theories are not descriptions to be evaluated by their literal correspondence to some discoverable reality, but partial ways of understanding the world[6].

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1 - ibid

2 - Hjørland, Birger, and Jenna Hartel: Afterword: Ontological, Epistemological and Sociological Dimensions of Domains. Knowledge Organization, 2003, 30(3/4). 239-245

3 - Katie Moon and Deborah Blackman: A guide to ontology, epistemology, and philosophical perspectives for interdisciplinary researchers, published on line on 2 May 2017, in

https://i2insights.org/2017/05/02/philosophy-for-interdisciplinarity/

4 - ibid

5 -ibid

6 - E. Diaz-Leon: What Is Social Construction? European Journal of Philosophy 23:4 ISSN 0966-8373, 2013 John Wiley & Sons Ltd , pp. 1137—1152

✓ Subjectivist epistemology relates to the idea that reality can be expressed in a range of symbol and language systems, and is stretched and shaped to fit the purposes of individuals such that people impose meaning on the world and interpret it in a way that makes sense to them[1].

Related to what has been mentioned, we could add a fourth, even fifth type[2]:

✓ Critical realist epistemology states that the social world is a complexity, but it is a real material world that our knowledge of it is often socially conditioned and subject to challenge re-interpretation. There are laws governing human affairs that may be unobserved and unobservable, invisible or hidden, but these are not therefore to be ignored.

2-3- Methods and Methodological aspects

The work of sociology does not happen in office, sociologists meet people in the real world, and out of their comfort zone, and this requires a specific way to observe, participate, gather data, process and analyse them. The idea is that field work in sociology is not an easy job, things in practice are more complicated, with different forms of information and ways to collect and process them, many shortcomings appear: pseudo-quantification, imitation of natural science methodology, dependence on interview data, questionnaires, or informal observations[3]. This debate impinges on opposition between the quantitative methodologies used by positivists and the qualitative ones used by constructivists. We distinguish between methods based on a positivist epistemology and methods relying more on interpretation[4]. In details, there is A division in the social sciences between those who use variables and those who deal with case studies. If the aim is explanation and generalization as to what causes what, then it is useful to isolate variables and examine their effects across cases. If we are interested in context and in the complexity of outcomes, then whole cases may

1 - op,cit https://i2insights.org/2017/05/02/philosophy-for-interdisciplinarity/

2 - Harry J. Kienzle: "Pragmatic epistemology." in: Epistemology and Sociology The British Journal of Sociology, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Dec., 1970), pp. 413-424

3 - https://www.britannica.com/topic/sociology/

4 - Donatella della Porta and Michael Keating: Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences A Pluralist Perspective, Cambridge University Press 2008, pp. 1-17

yield more insight. Of course, in between many sociologists prefer the third way: triangulation which is about using different research methods to complement one another. Here again it is difficult to triangulate distinct epistemologies [1].

2-4- The problem of causation

In philosophy the problem of causation in general refers to the cause-effect relation. To say that an event or fact bears the causal relation to another is to imply that the former in some sense explains the latter, in opposition to contiguity and succession, causation suppose a necessary connection, however, the idea of necessary connection is subjective[2]. In social theory the problem is much more complicated, it concerns the causal mechanisms that account for the emergence of wholes from the interaction between parts; this of course turn to be the problem of the micro and the macro, and so on scale[3].

The problem of the causal impact of social structures has been debated for ages in the literature of the social sciences, a discussion that dates back at least to Émile Durkheim and Max Weber. For example, and in opposition to Durkheim, **Franklin Giddings**, more than a century ago, in 1901, affirms that sociology was not going to consist of laws: "The causal knowledge of sociology would consist, they thought, of correlations, and, at best, sociology would discover a set of variables whose correlations persisted in a variety of circumstances[4]". This causal complexity is at the historical focus in discussions of the problem of social science knowledge: too many variables, too many interacting causes, and no good way to untangle these causes[5]. How should we conceive then the relation between cause and correlation?

Manuel Delanda describes this relation between cause and effect in sociology perfectly, i.e the link between the micro and the macro levels of social reality, and gives

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1 - ibid

2- Causation, https://www.britannica.com/topic/causation

3 - Sallie Marston: The Ontological Turn in Social Theory. A Commentary on 'Human Geography without Scale' New Series, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Jan., 2007), pp. 106-111

4 - Stephen Turner: Philosophy and Sociology, in Companion to Sociology, edited by George Ritzer, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2012, pp.9-25

5-ibid

it a name **"The reductionism problem"**. In his pertinent analysis of the question **Delanda** wrote:

"Reductionism in social science is often illustrated with the methodological individualism …in which all that matters are rational decisions made by individual persons in isolation from one another. But the phenomenological individualism of social constructivism is also reductionist even though its conception of the micro-level is not based on individual rationality but on the routines and categories that structure individual experience…The other position (..) is that social structure is what really exists, individual persons being mere products of the society in which they are born… Durkheim … Marx…Talcott Parsons are examples of this stance. These authors do not deny the existence of individual persons but assume that once they have been socialized by the family and the school, (…) This tends to make the micro-level a mere epiphenomenon and for this reason this stance may be labelled 'macro-reductionist. There are many other positions…such as praxis, the true core of social reality, with both individual agency and social structure being by-products of this fundamental level…. There are many social scientists whose work focuses on social entities that are neither micro nor macro: Erving Goffman's work on conversations and other social encounters; Max Weber's work on institutional organizations; Charles Tilly's work on social justice movements; not to mention the large number of sociologists working on the theory of social networks, or the geographers studying cities and regions. What the work of these authors reveals is a large number of intermediate levels between the micro and the macro, the ontological status of which has not been properly conceptualized"[1].

Social reality for **DeLanda** is complex, and it is so 'naïf' to deal with in terms of simple dichotomies: micro/macro, individual/collective, rational or intentional/unintentional or irrational, observable/not observable. **Delanda** aims by this pertinent text to show the possibilities of rethinking the social in ontological terms, For

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1- Manuel DeLanda : A new philosophy for society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity, British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data, , pp. 10-13, 20011

DeLanda, however, to elaborate an ontology of the social means the necessity to re-build, i.e re-conceptualize many notions in sociology[1].

To better explain this, **Dave Elder-Vass[2]** for instance takes norms as an illustrative example for the situation and asks the simple question: what are morals, and how could they possibly be causally effective social structures?

There are two sorts of answer to this question according to **Elder-Vass**, both can be traced back to **Émile Durkheim**: individual representations and collective representations. The first answer implies that these normative beliefs are only causally effective as items of knowledge or belief held by individual human agents. The second argues that it is not individual normative beliefs but collective ones that are causally effective here: that individual-level normative beliefs combine to give a collective representation, and that it is this collective representation that is causally effective. But it is crystal clear that neither the first answer nor the second provide an adequate solution to the problem of the transition from the individual to social level, just as the uncertainty principle of **Heinsenberg**, the more precise the analysis of individuals as social realities is the less precise the results on collective representations, and vice versa[3]. This is what scientists call **Durkheim's dilemma:** should we accept the ontological implausibility of collective representations, or the mechanistic inadequacy of individual representations?[4]

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1 - Patricia Clough, Sam Han and Rachel Schiff: A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity by Manuel DeLanda ,London and New York: Continuum, December, 2007, pp 1-10

2 - Dave Elder-Vass: Journal of Critical Realism 6(2) 2007, a method for social ontology iterating ontology and social research, pp. 226–49

3 -Elder-vass details the problem: "Both arguments, however, have apparent weaknesses. If it is individual representations that cause the enactment of social practices, then we seem to be missing an explanation of the commonality of practices enacted by different individuals: the very thing that makes institutions what they are. The second alternative assumes that collectives as such can have representations, but this is highly problematic from an ontological perspective. Individuals can have beliefs because they have minds (and because they have brains), But groups of individuals do not have minds or brains, at least not in their own right, separately from the brains of the individual members of the group. It is therefore hard to see how they can have beliefs, at least beliefs of the group itself, separately from the beliefs held by individual members of the group," ibid

4 - Dave Elder-Vass: ibid

2-5- **The conceptual aspect**

A concept can be defined as 'the basic unit of thinking', they are abstract representations of the world, and the crucial stage in the research process, it is the stage at which the concepts are defined, because on relying upon these definitions the ideas and hypotheses are translated into an operational research design and into real research practice[1]. This why we did not stop asking in sociology the 'what-is' question: What is a social action? What is social reality? What is society? What is a social relation? What is the difference between social facts, social phenomena and social object? What is an institution? A corporation? Marriage? Capitalism? What makes a group a social group? What is money? What is a government? What about norms, identities, laws, organizations, conventions and roles?

Sociologists used to work with concepts, without basic and somehow shared notions such as institution, class, state and society, it is difficult to see how we could get anywhere; but when we use these concepts randomly, knowledge becomes impossible. According to **Dave Elder-Vass** concepts are contested when people use them in different ways, concepts create serious problems when there is no possibility of shared meaning. It is "confusing when the same word is used differently in different disciplines or even within the same discipline, or where meanings only partially agree and overlap because they are based on different epistemological premises or underpin radically different world-views"[2]. In natural sciences, it would be unthinkable to employ a concept such as 'molecule' or 'black hole'[3] without having shared rules that determine the basics of such usage of a concept.

Dave Elder-Vass defines this kind of deficiency as **"a lack of ontological rigour"**. Concepts are frequently used without any contextual definitions, and far from their real referents. The term "institution", for example, may be synonymous to "social structure" or "patterns of behaviour" or even "whole systems of rules and practices". The real

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1 - Peter Mair: Concepts and concept formation, in Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences op, cit, pp.177-198

2 - Dave Elder-Vass: Journal of Critical Realism 6(2) 2007, a method for social ontology iterating ontology and social research, pp. 226—249

3 -ibid

problem here is that "social scientists seem happy to employ concepts while disregarding their ontological basis" [1]. But this is a wrong path. As **Leonidas Tsilipakos** puts it: "Doing social theory is primarily assuming a theoretical attitude towards language and only derivatively vindicating any proposition about social phenomena… adopting a theoretical attitude leads theorists into a confused relationship to the concepts [2]". This is why we should take concepts seriously.

2-6- The practical aspects of sociology or 'The paradox of the social sciences'[3].

Brian Epstein's book, "*The Ant trap: Rebuilding the Foundations of the Social Sciences* "[4], begins with the statement "The Paradox of the Social Sciences: "The supposed paradox is that over the last twenty years, there has been an explosive, growth in the collection of data about people, and so there ought to have been a corresponding improvement in the ability of social scientists to resolve questions about such things as "the workings of the economy, the sources of poverty, the prescriptions for improving education, and financial regulation"; but in fact the social sciences "are hardly budging."[5]

Indeed, the practical achievements of the social sciences, need to be scrutinized and taken seriously. The applied side of sociological investigations should be important as well as the theoretical side. If we take position with **Epstein** who takes the "failures of social science" to be an established fact, we should extend our thinking beyond

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1 - ibid

2 - Leonidas Tsilipakos: Clarity and Confusion in social theory taking Concepts seriously Published by Ashgate Publishing limited, 2015, pp. 10-16

3 - Robert Sugden : Ontology, Methodological Individualism, and the Foundations of the Social Sciences, Journal of Economic Literature 2016, 54(4), 1377—1389

4 - Brian Epstein: The Ant trap: Rebuilding the Foundations of the Social Sciences, Oxford University Press, 2015

5 - Robert Sugden: "The usual clichés about the failure of economists to predict the 2008 crash are rehearsed; the pre-crash optimism of the usual suspects…is mocked; Paul Krugman's New York Times column is cited in evidence" in Ontology, Methodological Individualism, and the Foundations of the Social Sciences, Journal of Economic Literature 2016, 54(4), 1377—1389

theories to the issue of the applications of these theories in real life, because practice of science is also a scientific matter that needs an ontological investigation as well[1].

2-7- When the crisis is exacerbated in the era of Big data[2].

After the end of "Methods and the Mess in Social Science Research"[3], the time has come to another kind of crisis that sociology faces, let us call it: the Virtual crisis. A few years ago, Chris Anderson, former editor in chief of the magazine Wired, published a provocative article in 2008: "The End of theory: The Data deluge makes the scientific method obsolete"[4]. In his article, Anderson affirmed that in the era of petabyte information and supercomputing, the traditional hypothesis driven scientific method would become obsolete. In the era of Big data there is no need for theory[5]. At the petabyte scale, information is not a matter of simple three and four dimensional taxonomy and order, but of dimensionally agnostic statistics. This calls for an entirely different "Ontology" of processing and analysis. In this eminent extract of the article, which becomes iconic, Anderson says: "Forget taxonomy, ontology, and psychology. Who knows why people do what they do? The point is they do it, and we can track and measure it with unprecedented fidelity. With enough data, the numbers speak for themselves.[6]"

What is left for sociologists in this new era? First answer: Not much, because it appears that sociology faces a world where massive amounts of data and applied mathematics replace everything. A world where scientists are trained to recognize that building models is more important than searching for causal explanation[7].

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1 - Some scholars point to a practice turn in social sciences as well.

2 - Mike Savage Roger Burrows: The Coming Crisis of Empirical Sociology, Sociology Volume 41, Number 5, October 2007 and Some Further Reflections on the Coming Crisis of Empirical Sociology, Sociology Volume 43, Number 4, August 2009

3 - John Law: After method, Mess in Social Science Research, Routledge, 2004

4 - idem

5 - Chris Anderson: The end of theory, 2008, http://archive.wired.com/science/ discoveries/magazine/16-07/pb_theory/.

6 - ibid

7 - Sophie Mutzel: Facing Big Data: Making sociology relevant, Big Data & Society July—December 2015: 1—4

The era of big data entails facing new epistemological, methodological and theoretical problems[1], solving new issues as the relationships between the binaries: Life/Data, Mind/ Machine, and Induction/Deduction[2], which could impinge to other issues concerning the locus and nature of human life, the nature of interpretation, the categorical constructions of individual entities and agents, the nature and relevance of contexts and temporalities, and the determinations of causality[3]. This era is concerned also with the questions of: is it true that Big Data is able to, to stand in for social life itself?[4], the relation between ''Big Data and Reality,'' what kind of lenses we need to use if we are to make use of Big Data to study social life because at the end of the analysis the big data, we are dealing with is somehow software generated.

3- Responses to the crisis: before the 'real' ontological turn.

This critique of the natural science analogy[5] or exactly, this critique of the 'positivistic haunting' as put beautifully by George Steinmetz[6], was associated with the emergence of new epistemological approaches that start from empiricism and positivism in different versions[7], through rationalism, structuralism, interpretativism, pragmatism, post-structuralism, and post-modernism, the roots and the occurrence of these

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1 - Rob Kitchin: Big Data, new epistemologies and paradigm shifts, Big Data & Society, 1 April 2014, 1-12

2 - Robin Wagner-Pacifici, John W Mohr and Ronald L Breiger: Ontologies, methodologies, and new uses of Big Data in the social and cultural sciences, Big data And Society, July—December 2015: 1—11

3 -ibid

4 - ibid

5 - August Comte prefers the analogy of biology,

6 - "positivism's paradoxical power" looks like "a zombie-like refusal to stay buried", in: The politics of method in the human sciences, op, cit.

7 - In neo-positivism and then post-positivism... Reality is still considered to be objective, but it is only imperfectly knowable. The positivist trust in causal knowledge is modified by the admission that some phenomena are not governed by causal laws but... by probabilistic ones. .. If positivism closely resembles the traditional scientific method in its search for regularities, post-positivism is closer to modern scientific approaches, which accept a degree of uncertainty. In Donatella Della Porta and Michael Keating: Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences A Pluralist Perspective, Cambridge University Press 2008, pp. 1-17

approaches are multiple, scholars in general call them: epistemological turns or waves. There are according to Angela Lacerda Nobre four turns[1]:

The first is the logical turn, in early 1920s, originating in the work of the Vienna Circle, which reacted against 19th century's positivism and promoted logical positivism. Carnap is the leading figure of this period. The best example in sociology is the school of Chicago and the priority of field work in practicing the science of society. This fits perfectly with the idea that knowledge rests upon public verification rather than personal experience.

The second shift is the linguistic turn, which developed out of the works of Saussure and Peirce at the turn of the century, and then it was further developed by Wittgenstein, and many others throughout the first half of the century. Levy-Strauss developed structuralism by applying Saussure's thought to culture in general. The interest in language included not only the syntax and semantic aspects, the structure and meaning, but also and above all the pragmatics of language use[2].

The third epistemic shift is the context turn, from post-war to the 1970s, and refers to an extension of the linguistic turn into a full historical-cultural revolution which radically contextualised science. Kuhn's work on the conflict of paradigms reflects this change. This development implied also a relativist turn. Further examples of this movement are the feminist standpoint epistemology, radical hermeneutics, constructivism, post-structuralism, and postmodernism, as well as the works of Foucault and Bourdieu[3].

The fourth shift is the knowledge turn that refers to the last quarter of the century; it is an attempt to deal with the problem of the inherent ambiguity of context. It is the turn towards knowledge in the discourses of the human and social sciences[4]. Under the fourth shift, appears in sociology what we call the "Cultural Turn", which gives rise to a

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1 - Angela Lacerda Nobre : Social Philosophy, Communities, and the Epistemic Shifts in Encyclopedia of communities of practice in information and knowledge management / Elayne Coakes and Steve Clarke, editors by Idea Group Inc , pp 481-484. 2006
2 - ibid
3 -ibid
4 -ibid

new theoretical approach drawn from symbolic anthropology in its both versions: the structuralist anthropology of Claude Levy Strauss and interpretive anthropology of Clifford Geertz, linguistics, and literary criticism.

The new branch: Cultural Sociology[1] which has rejected the scientific insistence on treating social practices as "thing-like"[2], as Jeffrey alexander put it clearly:" culture is not a thing but a dimension, not an object to be studied as a dependent variable but a thread that runs through, one that can be teased out of every conceivable social form'[3]. 'Culture' here is explained …by other, supposedly 'harder' variables. For Alexander How the human world actually works involves an opposite causal trajectory, not from 'society' to 'culture', but vice versa, from meaningful cultural structures to social institutions and practices. Every action is seen to be embedded in a horizon of affect and meaning, while institutions always have a powerful and efficacious cultural foundation.[4]

4- The road not taken: from Ontology to social ontology: An answer for the everlasting crisis in sociology.

In the last three decades the field of social ontology has seen a surge of interest, and many sociologists, after years of denial and refusal of ontological thinking in sociology, begin to believe that: we cannot escape the need to be thoughtful and clear about questions of ontology, it is coming your way whether you like it or not. In fact, it's already there. What is the source of this conviction? How did this happen?

Corbetta argues that 'Usually, competing approaches in the social sciences are contrasted on:…(a) their epistemological base, related to the possibility of knowing this

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1 - What cultural sociology aims is to 'interpret … collective meanings and trace the moral textures and delicate emotional pathways by which individuals and groups come to be influenced by them'. 'Sociology of culture' approaches merely seek to 'explain what created meanings … and to expose how the ideal structures of culture are formed by other structures … more material, less ephemeral kind', in Alexander, J.C: The Meanings of Social Life,Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 5

2 - David Inglis: Durkheimian and Neo-Durkheimian Cultural Sociologies, in Hand book of cultural sociology, Sage publication, 2016, pp. 61-77

3 - Alexander, J.C: The Meanings of Social Life, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003

4 - David Inglis: Durkheimian and Neo-Durkheimian Cultural Sociologies, in Hand book of cultural sociology, Sage publication, 2016, pp. 61-77

world and the forms this knowledge would take; (b) their methodological base, referring to the technical instruments that are used in order to acquire that knowledge' but before that, he emphasises: they are contrasted on' on (c) their ontological base, related to the existence of a real and objective world'[1].

Corbeta's idea is simple and clear: when the solution is not epistemological, nor methodological, it should be ontological, it's obvious that many of the controversies that have developed since the early decades of this century are rooted in philosophical issues, which means that sociology should return to social philosophy to find some answers. In other words, it appears that the attempts of positivism to avoid ontological issues resulted in assumptions that were counterproductive. In short, an ontological investigation is inescapable as Max Weber states in his Magnum Opus: "Economy and Society" "social ontology consists mainly in revealing out the nature of the basic entities that are constitutive of the subject matters of the social sciences"[2].

This is exactly the Flyvbjer's idea when he suggests that: "since the social sciences can never gain the explanatory power of the natural sciences because of the nature of the world, they should return to this earlier age and seek to provide reflexive analysis and discussions of values and interests aimed at praxis, that is, to contribute to the realization of a better society"[3]. In short, ontological theorizing is part of the scientific enterprise of understanding the social reality. It is inherent within the scientific research.

Daniel Little confirms that "social ontology matters" for conducting research and theory in social science, and affirms that the nature of the social world is not different in kind from more specific sociological claims about social class or individual rationality, which means that ontological theorizing is part of the scientific enterprise of understanding the social world[4].

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1 - Donatella della Porta and Michael Keatin: How many approaches in the social sciences? An epistemological introduction, op,cit

2 - Weber, Max: Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology, Berkeley: California University Press.

3 - Donatella della Porta and Michael Keatin: How many approaches in the social sciences? An epistemological introduction, op,cit

4 - Daniel Little: Social Ontology De-dramatized, Philosophy of the Social Sciences 1—11, 2020

At the end of the analysis, the "Road not taken" for long, becomes today very attractive. So far, one thing is sure, Ontology is unavoidable in social research. It is there, explicitly or implicitly, hidden in the dark side of theories and approaches.

Now, what social ontology could add to the existing sociological approaches, and how sociology can benefit from the application of social ontology both theoretically and methodologically is the new wave. Before answering these questions, it appears essential that we define the meaning of general ontology first.

What is general ontology first?

Ontology is the philosophical study of being in general, or of what applies neutrally to everything that is real. It was called "first philosophy" by Aristotle in Book IV of his Metaphysics. The Latin term ontologia, "science of being", was invented by the German philosopher Jacob Lorhard and first appeared in his work Ogdoas Scholastica in 1606. It has become popular thanks to the German rationalist philosopher Christian Wolff in his Latin writings, especially "Philosophia Prima sive Ontologia" "First Philosophy or Ontology" published in 1730[1]. The term Ontology in this article refers to: "the science of what is, of the kinds and structures of objects, properties, events, processes, and relations in every area of reality"[2]

A little problem: ontology vs. metaphysics?

Metaphysics and ontology should not be taken just for issues related to theology or other religious entities. Ontology is related to metaphysics, but metaphysics is a very broad domain. While the metaphysicians attempt to answer questions about how the world is, ontology tries to answer questions of what things exist in the world. Theories of ontology imply assertions of what makes the world and its objects. Ontological theories describe or explain reality and how it is structured. Even if some authors define them in an identical way, it appears that is a mistake, for sure they are not the same thing, nor the same field of study. Simply put: ontology postulates which entities exist in the world. Let us consider an example that might clarify the distinction: The

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1 - Ontology in https://www.britannica.com/topic/ontology-metaphysics

2 - Smith, B.: Ontology. In: The Blackwell guide to the philosophy of computing and information, ed Florido, L. Oxford Blackwell publishing. (2004), p.155

electromagnetic force. By definition this force is responsible for the repulsion of like and the attraction of unlike electric charges, but much more the electromagnetic force is invisible. Yet it is pretty hard to say that this force is not *real*. So what it is the electromagnetic force? The first answer is that this force is a "kind" of physical law that affects matter. So, it appears that the mode of being or of existence of the electromagnetic force is some sort of physical law that affects matter and perhaps everything else in the universe. But is this the "real" answer to the question of "what really causes "attraction and repulsion"? Well, the second question is metaphysical and not ontological. In fact, we do not know for real what causes the repulsion of like and the attraction of unlike electric charges, but at the same time we have traces/marks/fingerprints of its existence, in our case we know the effect of this force and we can measure it. So ontologically, we have to deal with this reality. Yes "the laws of electromagnetic force" may change tomorrow, but this happens only on the basis of discovering new realities, until then we have our ontologies, we have our realities. This is exactly the same thing with the concept of society and the field of social ontology.

Social ontology: What is it? And what for?

Several notions of social ontology have been introduced, but all of them have a common denominator, that is: social ontology is the study of the nature of social reality. It is concerned with analysing the constituents, or building blocks, of social things and various entities that arise from social interaction in the world. In other words, it studies the types of entities that constitute the social world and the type of being that distinguishes social reality from other types of realities. The "objects" investigated in social ontology include norms, conventions, customs, laws, organizations, groups, identities roles, money, institutions, social classes, races, genders, artefacts, corporations, language.

So, what could be the benefits of social ontology in social research? According to Mouzelis, if Social ontology has to be "useful" for sociology, it should at least respond to the appeals of two needs: 'the need to conceptualise' and 'the need to theorise'[1].On the first level, Simon Lohse considers that social ontology provides better

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1 - Leonidas Tsilipakos: Clarity and Confusion in social theory: Taking concept seriuosely, Routledge, 2016

understanding of concepts such as structure, rule, practice, actor, power, field, culture, and network, identity, gender, stratification, social space, power, rationality, and technology. With these concepts, investigators conceptualize their topics or subject matters and also formulate their descriptions. Based on these formulations and descriptions, the concepts become 1- operationalized, that is a part of empirical work, 2- a bearer of the explanations or interpretations that the theory provide, concepts become the conceptual apparatus of the theory[1]. On the second level, Lohse suggests that in order to "build" social theories that capture the "real" nature of the social world, we need to have an ontology that provides something logical about the constituents, or building blocks, properties and structure of social things and various entities that arise from social interaction in the world, without this kind of knowledge, let it be implicit or explicit, it is almost impossible to start investigating the social reality objectively, because regardless of the outcomes of a theory, they are determined by the structure of the social world. Normally, good ontologies bring good theories[2].

Additionally, social ontology could provide important topics and issues for investigation. Examples of such issues are the nature of normativity, the character of social space, the relation between actor and structure, and relations between society and nature. Real social problems and abstract dilemmas will always motivate studies of the social world. Finally, social ontology might lead to solve the problem of pluralism in paradigms and approaches in social sciences, that is going beyond this competition between rival schools, explanatory frameworks and the different interpretations of the same phenomena. Here, social ontology might help by reducing pluralism in the social sciences through "some" restrictions of explanatory frameworks in the social sciences[3].

Lohse at the end of his analysis, and against what he calls specifically "the anti-ontological pragmatism[4]", sums up the benefits of social ontology in three main points:

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1 - Lohse Simon Pragmatism, Ontology, and Philosophy of the Social Sciences in Practice. Philosophy of the Social Sciences, 47 (1) ,2017, pp. 3-27.

2 - ibid

3 - ibid

4 - They are fervents critics of ontology/social ontological investigations in radical way: Lohse on the basis of. Tsilipakos's article "The Poverty of Ontological Reasoning" and others lists the misfits as such:-Recent attempts to "ontologize" everything are deeply misguided and cannot add anything but confusion to

1-Ontological investigations do not determine research in the social sciences but they can be used to examine and restrict ontological assumptions in light of the postulated explanatory approach. It is essential that entities used in social explanations have the properties needed to do the explanatory work they are meant to do; 2- Some forms of social explanations rely heavily on unclear or taken for-granted ontological assumptions that can (and should) be made clear/explicit by ontological investigations; 3-The critical analysis and comparison of different conceptions of "the social" can illuminate deeper relationships between different explanatory frameworks and may thereby contribute to a clarifying systematization of the fragmented social sciences[1].

Another little problem: Sociology vs. social ontology.

What is the difference between a sociological and a socio-ontological investigation?

Let us begin with these simple questions: Could we for sure make a distinction between social and non-social facts? Is every fact that occurs a social fact? Is there a limitless number of social entities in the realm of the social existence, or there are just few that encompass all the rest? What is the mode of existence of a social fact or a social object? What is its mode of action? What does it take for them to survive over the time?

As a matter of fact, these are questions which belong to the field of social ontology but not sociology, how is that?

Philosophers like Brian Epstein[2] set the role of social ontology as follow: "First, cataloguing what kind of social entities exist; second, answering the question: how the social world is built. What are its building blocks and how do they come together to build it? Social ontology should not be thought of as the study of "ontological claims" such as "social groups exist" or "there are no social spirits." But instead, it is the study

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contemporary social theory)-ontological investigations is slowing down or obstructing real progress in social theory, There are many ontological disputes (e.g., individualism vs. emergentism, naturalism vs. interpretationism, collectivism vs. singularism)- deep ontological disputes appear to be nothing more than persistent verbal disputes. Thus, the pragmatists argue, we should leave ontology behind and focus on explanatory and methodological issues in the social sciences. In Lohse Simon Pragmatism, Ontology, and Philosophy of the Social Sciences in Practice. Philosophy of the Social Sciences, 47 (1) ,2017, pp. 3-27.

1 -ibid

2 - Brian Epstein: A Framework for Social Ontology, Philosophy of the Social Sciences, 2015, pp. 147 —167

of "ontological building relations" between different kinds of entities. The purpose of social ontology is to investigate the nature of these facts. Social ontology addresses the properties of social objects, as well as their relationship with non-social objects.[1]

History teaches us, that even atrocities from government or dictators do not spark revolution among people, and in the contrary a death of one person could do the job perfectly. Why is it the case? In social ontology, we are concerned with why social facts have specifically certain social characteristics, and what puts them in place. In other words, what makes a specific element so relevant to change people's ideas and practices in some spatial and historical contexts, but not in others? Why social change does not seem to happen in some countries even if they are in everlasting institutional or organisational mess?

Epstein warns us that social ontology is not about causes, that is the task of social sciences or sociology in particular, and this due to two reasons: first: the complexity of the social world, there is no direct, unique cause to explain a social fact it is simply complicated. This why we should keep "An open mind about the domain of social ontology and understand the category of social facts broadly", secondly: "Key to this broad treatment of facts is to notice that not every social fact is known, thought about, or conceptualized"[2]

Epstein to better strengthen the argument of his project[3] brings here two examples, the first one is about the ontology of corporations, here, it is not very helpful to ask the question: what is a corporation? It is not too clear what this question is even asking. Rather, we need to investigate lots of facts about them: What are the parts of a corporation? Does it have any essential properties? What does it take for a corporation to survive over time? What is it for a corporation to take an action or to have an attitude or intention? The Second one: why Assad is a war criminal? There are, of course,

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1 - ibid

2 - ibid

3 - Without diving into details, Epstein set up a social ontology project that consists of two distinct projects. The grounding project is the inquiry into the conditions for social facts to obtain. What facts in the world are metaphysically sufficient reasons…for social facts of some kind? The anchoring project is the inquiry into what puts those conditions in place. What sets up the grounding conditions for social facts, to be what they are?

causes for the criminality: Perhaps Assad became a war criminal because of pressure from his advisors. Perhaps because of the way his mother treated him when he was a child. Perhaps it was his training as an ophthalmologist. Those are questions for social science but not for the social ontology[1]

The entity that we call social reality?

As stated above, when we talk about categories of social entities, these includes for examples social actions, social facts, social objects, social events, social actions, social properties, social groups, and social structures. But these conceptualisations are not taken for granted in the field of social ontology. Are there any social entities?[2] Soon we get to face the paradox: Common sense and our everyday experiences seem to confirm that there are social entities, but at the same time we don't have any certain clue about their nature or their "essence", and we don't know for sure how they have such power on people. If social entities exist, what is/are their mode/s of existence[3]?

What kinds of entities, powers, forces, and relations exist in the social realm? What kinds of relations tie them together? What are some of the mechanisms and causal powers that constitute the workings of these social entities? Are there distinctive levels of social organization and structure that can be identified?

These are sorts of questions that we address in the field: Are social entities natural kinds? Are they real? What is their mode of existence? Do they have essences? Are they mind-dependent?[4] Let's go beyond the questions now.

Social reality leaves a mark.

I consider here, the article of **Llwellyn Gross** where he developed a specific view on the mode of being and the "localisation" of social reality[5]. In this article **Ilwellyn**

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1 -idem

2 - Rebecca Mason , Katherine Ritchie : Social Ontology, In Ricki Bliss & James Miller (eds.), Routledge Handbook of Metametaphysics, 2020, p. 13

3 -'what do we mean by existence? 1- 'existence' is univocal, that whatever exists exists in the same sense.2- Each metaphysically different kind of thing exists in its own. Mode of existence: For example: the 'mode' of existence of mind and body. Bodies have a spatial 'mode' of existence, minds do not , is there then any difference between the two kinds of existence or we they are just one thing?

4 - Rebecca Mason : The metaphysics of social kinds, Philosophy Compass; v 11, pp. 841—850, 2016

5 - Frank Hindriks ,The location problem in Social ontology Synthese, 2013,issue 190: pp.413-437.

explains that the formative elements of social reality are at once divided and united, diverse and complementary. Social reality is not to be found in the idealized picture of pure reason or of pure emotion[1]. Thus he concluded that social reality could be found in The daily performance , here **Ilwellyn** find clues in Erving Goffman theory of "The Presentation of the self in everyday life"[2]; the tension of life, i.e social reality is centred in the vital stress of opposites; in one's commitment to face the counters of each act without paralysis, without amputation of experience, and without alienation from life; the spoken word where conversation is the vehicle of social reality[3]; and in the writen word [4].

The written word, as a part of social reality, is well explained in the book of **Maurizio Ferraris: Why It Is Necessary to Leave Traces**[5], where he exposes his theory of Documentality, in which he investigates and presents his social ontology and understanding of the what is social reality. In this line of analysis Ferraris explain the main characteristics of the social[6]:

1-There is nothing (social) outside the text*:* Unlike natural objects, whose existence depends on the material consistency of the objects, social objects exist only if there is a trace that, in some way, performs the act that has brought them into being. A necessary condition for the existence of an object is not only the coming into being of a particular type of action, but also the fact that this action produces a trace in the form of an inscription. That trace is the bearer of a representational act that, in the case of social objects, is the result of a dual action[7].

2-Society is not based on communication, but on recording*:* For Ferraris, recording and traces are the conditions of possibility of social reality. the latter exists

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1 - Llwellyn Gross: Where Is Social Reality? sociological inquiry, volume 33,issue 1 , January 1963, pp.3-8

2 - The paradox in Goffman theory lies in: when performing or acting , the individuals may sincerely believe their acts express "what they believe" the"real reality"or, in the contrary, may have no belief in their own acts.

3 - Even if , as he adds elswhere, conversation as a testimony of social reality has its flaws. Gross, op,cit.

4 -idem.

5 - Maurizio Ferraris: Documentality: Why It Is Necessary to Leave Traces, Fordham university press, 2012

6 - Tiziana Andina: An Ontology for Social Reality Translated by Sarah   De Sanctis was first published in Italian as Ontologia sociale. Transgenerazionalità, potere, giustizia, copyright , by Carocci editore S.p.A., Roma, 2016, pp.92-93

7 - ibid

in relation to the possibility that human beings have to deposit the intentional content of their actions into relatively articulated traces and record them on surfaces that allow one to recall them. In this context Ferraris criticize the arguments of Marshall McLuhan who have taken communication as the condition of possibility of the social world. The eminent exemplification of social object is the document, it is in the strong sense, are inscriptions of acts[1].

An example: social action

On the base of Reinach's[2] "plaidoirie" for an a priori social ontology, that is an a priori essence of social reality, Tiziana analyses the social situation given by Reinach in his work entitled the A Priori Foundations of Civil Law published in 1913, where he tries to answer the question of: what is the essence of the positif law?[3]. Let's consider an action: making a promise to another person. Why this action is a social action?

According to Reinach, when performing an action such a promise, we are establishing a NEW relationship that did not exist before[4]. the world, after the promise, is not the same as before, in that new fictional world emerges into being a new part of reality: The relationship that ties him to the person receiving the promise, and this leads him to change the world in which that relationship is contained, so that it will conform to what is involved in the relationship itself[5]. This relationship brings into being two new elements: an obligation that needs to be fulfilled and a legitimate claim[6]. What is surprising here is that:

"The promising produces a unique bond between the two people in virtue of which the one person […] can claim something and the other is obliged to perform it or to grant it. This bond presents itself as a result, as a product (so to speak) of the promising." And much more: the action we call "promise" has a precise structure, it does not depend on the fact that, due to a conventional choice, humans have agreed

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1 -ibid

2 - Adolf Reinach was a leading representative of the so-called realist phenomenology, he was described as Husserl's "first real co-worker in the development of the phenomenological movement".

3 -Tiziana Andina: An Ontology for Social Reality, 2016,op,cit

4 - Tiziana Andina: op, cit, pp. 30-32

5 - ibid

6 - ibid

to commit to some acts of the will[1], because as **Reinach** argue strongly: "The action of promising is completely independent of the content of the promise. Its force, its strength lies exactly in creating a new world of reality, new relationships"[2], in other word it lies in leaving a trace.

5- Models and theories of social ontology

5-1- Models

The first thing to emphasize before exposing these social ontological models and explaining them, is that we should take those models right from the start as ideal-types, which mean as methodological tools to approach social reality with different kind of lenses. There is no reason here to consider the social ontological presuppositions of these models as working in one direction and independently from each other. Social reality is complex and these models help to describe it as it is in "the real world". This why , it is not strange or absurd or wrong that certain theories in social sciences may utilise only one type of social ontology, whereas others may rely on two. So, it is worth noting that the five models presented here, if combined, could perfectly solve the misfits in sociology by providing new response to its everlasting crisis.

Now, I begin by exposing the first model on the basis of the classification of **Tizian Andina** who identifies two opposing theoretical models: The stipulative model and the essentialist[3].

The stipulative model: relies on the philosophical position developed by David Hume and others, for whom social reality is originated in stipulation, according to this position, social reality exists because human beings, for their interests and through an agreement, have decided that it should exist, in a manner functional to some purposes that they have established and shared. Therefore, from this perspective, social reality

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1 - This why In essence, positive law is not what creates the objects of the social world, but rather it is what uses them, applies them or puts them in motion; whereas philosophy, in a way, discovers them. In op,cit, p.33

2 - op,cit,ibid

3 - Tiziana Andina ,op, cit, pp 22-30

exists because human beings have conventionally decided for its existence and chosen the rules through which it functions[1].

The essentialist model: is based on **Edmund Husserl**'s paper entitled "Soziale Ontologie und deskriptive Soziologie" published in 1910, where he coined the phrase "social ontology" and indicated the main lines of one of the eminent approach in contemporary social ontology., Husserl phenomenology sees reality as composed of things that have invariable essences, so the identification of these invariant that constitute the real is the first thing to do. So **social reality**, **has an a-priori essence and a precise and stable structure**, this structure does not depend on the fact that humans have conventionally decided to agree to commit some acts. Social reality has further "basic normativity" that is somehow sui generis and independent entity[2].

On the same line of ideas, **Emmanuel Renault** presents a three-model classification of social ontology: substantial, relational and processual ontology[3]:

Substantial ontology is the set of theories that assume a primacy of substance over relations and becoming. Aristotle is the most important instantiation of these theories, firstly, he identified being with substance; secondly, he contended that the concepts of relation and becoming presuppose the concept of substance [4].

Relational ontology refers to theories that assume a primacy of relation over the interrelated terms, and over becoming. Relational ontology adopts a position that does not only acknowledge the full reality of the relations, but also considers that there is more reality in relations than in the interrelated terms[5].The relation here is not only a medium of knowledge or a logical concept it is the viewpoint from which whoever wants to do a sociological analysis, according to this view**"** Society is relations not has relations.

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1 - ibid

2 - Tiziana Andina: op, cit

3 - Emmanuel Renault Critical Theory and Processual Social Ontology, Journal of Social Ontology 2016; 2(1): 17—32

4 - ibid

5 -ibid

Processual ontology: Philosophically, it can be traced back to Whitehead, Leibniz and Hegel, Here the key idea is **Process** which means refers to "the nonstop dynamism" and to the fact that the mutual activity has the power to modify the properties of the elements as well as the form of relation that shapes this mutual activity. The distinctive feature of a processual ontology is the fact that the relationship between the relation and the interrelated elements is internalized and conceived of in dynamic terms. On the one hand, the interrelated elements exist nowhere else than in their interrelations so that the elements are no longer external to their relations (as in substantial ontologies). On the other hand, their interrelation is nothing else than the development of their own activity so that the relation does not have any kind of ontological priority over the elements (as in relational ontologies)[1].

5-2- Some theoritical framework.

The common denominator between these social ontological theoretical frameworks is that they share a realistic perspective. Each theory within this realist perspective presents a specific view to the social world and a distinct explanation of social reality[2]. In what follow, I present five theoretical frameworks that I suppose encompasses almost every aspect of the sociological crisis, and by extension try to provide some answers to all the issues that we have discussed before.

The first theoretical framework refers to the ontologies of Aristotelian inspiration which focus on the concept of person, agent and relations between people, an example of this position is the work of the **Margaret Gilbert**, the second group, exemplified by the position of the American philosopher **John Searle**, who considers the institutions and the rules as the center of social reality, The third framework is represented by the position of the Italian philosopher **Maurizio Ferraris**, which instead concentrates on the role and function of social objects[3], in addition to these three I introduce two more theoretical frameworks, the first one is **Pierpaolo Donati's** social ontology and his

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1 -ibid

2 - Tiziana Andina, op,cit, pp.57-96

3 -ibid

"real" relational theory as he repeatedly states, the second is **Tony Lawson's** social ontology, which could be framed in the critical realist social ontological approach.

5-2-1-   Margaret Gilbert social ontology

Building on the works of the founders of sociology Émile Durkheim, Georg Simmel, and Max Weber, **Margaret gilbert** have always in mind, since her first book[1], the question of : How is society possible?[2] What are the real foundations of living together? What is the essence of a social group? What is the glue that binds individuals together?

As a response, she develops in a series of books a systematic social ontology through which she analyses in deep, social reality and its supposed foundations, the phenomena that she focused on are among others: collective intentions, social conventions, social groups, group languages, collective belief, and acting together, political obligation.

The concepts on which this social ontology stands and through which it is articulated are: (1) the plural subject; (2) relationships and shared commitment; and (3) collective action. **Gilbert** discussed these concepts systematically in the works entitled "Social Facts, and Living Together: Rationality, Sociality and Obligation", the fourth concept, which **Gilbert** uses to determine the transition from the sphere of the social world to the more properly political realm, belongs to the sphere of normativity: it is the concept of "political obligation" discussed in A Theory of Political Obligation[3] .

Gilbert theory of plural subject

In her theory, **Gilbert tries** to build a bridge between the two opposite sociological traditions: holism and individualism. And the main question she addresses was: What

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1 - Margaret Gilbert : On social facts, Princeton University Press, 1989

2 - This is in fact Simmel's question in his classic paper: how is society possible? "Kant could propose and answer the fundamental question of his philosophy, How is nature possible? only because for him nature was nothing but the representation of nature. . . . As the elements of the world are given to us immediately, there does not exist among them, according to Kant, that coherence which alone can make out of them the intelligible regular unity of nature; or rather, which signifi es precisely the being-nature of those in themselves incoherently and irregularly emerging world fragments" in Simmel Georg: "How Is Society Possible?" American Journal of Sociology, 16(3), 1910, 372–91.

3 - Tizina Andina : op,cit,p.58

is the mode of transition from the individual dimension to the community dimension social structure, and from the latter to the state dimension?

The first part of the problematic raised by **Gilbert** is related to the concept of a group: 'what precisely is a social group?[1]" The second part refers to the question that Gilbert asks in her book, A Theory of Political Obligation: "how does it happen that a state can force its citizens to respect the law? What are the foundations of this obligation?[2]". **Gilbert' theory** places individuals at the center of her inquiry, according to her, individuals always precede the society they constitute, but at the same time she considers groups and relationships as the fundamental building blocks of the social world. How is that possible?

First thing to assert "is that groups are formed by individuals who share a commitment to certain ends, intentions, attitudes, or actions and that commitment is common knowledge among them: the theory can be said to be intentionalist" Second, "the individuals make the commitment as a unit or body or whole[3].

For Gilbert: "a social group is a plural subject, and *any* plural subject is a social group, including families, tribes, corporations, religious bodies, literary associations, peoples, and states[4]", In other words, the mode of being of social groups a communities as real social entities is as plural subject. "Surely a plural subject is the same kind of system as a singular agent. Its physical components are two or more human bodies. The movements of the system occur in response to the conception of the system which is contained contemporaneously in its physical parts, and which is based on the perception of what is taking place in each[5]."

The new concept suggested by **Gilbert** here is: "internationalism", which is the core of the theory of the plural subject, internationalism designates the mode of existence of individuals.

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1 - Margaret Gilbert : On n social facts, op, cit, 1989,p.1

2 - Margaret Gilbert : A Theory of Political Obligation: Membership, Commitment, and the Bonds of Society, Oxford University Press: Oxford (2006)

3 - Paul Sheehy: On Plural Subject Theory, Journal of Social Philosophy ·, Vol. 33 No. 3 , December 2002, 377–394.

4 - ibid

5 - Gilbert Margaret: on social facts, p.433

As **Gilbert** confirms: "Plural subject concepts apply only when certain individual people are in specific psychological states, that is only when they are jointly committed with certain others in some way"[1].

A social group, a community, and so on, would exist insofar as the multiple individual shares and commit to the view which compose it and carry the belief that it exists. So, it is not enough that individuals meet and make conventions, it is not enough that an abstract "collective reality" represents individuals and unites them, what it is necessary according to **Gilbert** is that individuals themselves believe that society exists, beyond conventions and independently of a "collective representation". What matters is the idea that "human individuals, in order to constitute collectivity in the ordinary sense of the term, must see themselves in a particular way[2]".

5-2-2-   John Searle social ontology

In the first place, **John Searle** was driven to the study of social reality, i.e social objects and social institutions by his study of language[3], i.e speech act, and by his analysis of philosophy of mind[4], i.e consciousness and intentionality in the second place. This is why he insisted that any conceptualisation of the social cannot be done without a social ontology, the philosophy that addresses the question of the nature, the structure, and mode of existence and of social entities. Very aware of the importance of his work, **Searle** distinguishes this kind of social investigation from sociology. Obviousely, it goes without saying that a better understanding of **Searl's theory** cannot be achieved without any analysis of the whole of **Searle's** philosophy.

John Searle presents the main features of his social ontological project in many publications, that include: "The Construction of Social Reality" (1995), "Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization" (2009). In one of his important articles, he posits the problem of social reality as such: "We are talking, in short, about

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1 - Gilbert Margaret: Living Together, Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996, p.9

2 - Margaret Gilbert : On social facts, Princeton University Press, 1989, p.13

3 - John Searle: Speech Acts. An Essay in the Philosophy of Language, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1969

4 - john Searl: Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press,1983.

social facts, social objects, and social processes and events… The problem arises in various forms, but one is this: We know independently that the world consists entirely of physical particles in fields of force…Our question, in its most broad and naïve form is: How can such animals as ourselves create a «social» reality? How can they create a reality of money, property, government, marriage and, perhaps most important of all, language? A peculiarly puzzling feature of social reality is that it exists only because we think it exists"[1].

In another text, the problem is put differently but with the same ideas:

"The notion of social object seems to me misleading at best, because it suggests that it is a class of social objects distinct from a class of non-social objects. But if you assume that there are two classes of objects, social and non-social, you immediately fall into contradictions of the following form, in my hand I hold an object. This object is both a piece of paper and a dollar bill. Like a piece of paper, it is a non-social object, like a dollar bill it is a social object. So, which one is it? The answer, of course, is that it's both. But to say that is to say that we do not have a separate class of objects that we can identify in terms of a social object. What we have to say, rather, is that something is a social object only under some descriptions and not under others. But then we are forced to ask the crucial question: what do these descriptions describe?"[2].

From the speech act to the construction of social reality Searle tries to explain how social objects come into being. The main question for him was: How social constructs can exist in a world consisting only of physical particles?

The logic of argument in **Searle's analysis** goes like this: first move, he distinguishes between brute facts, which have an existence independent of the existence of human beings; like The existence of the Planet Earth, and institutional facts, which the properties and the existence depend directly on the existence of the subjects [3], like the existence of USA. Simply put: "The world of brute facts is not dependent on our agreements but pre-given to us, in contrast with the social or

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1 - John R. Searle : Social Ontology: Some Basic Principles, Papers 80, 2006 51-71
2 - John Searle : L'ontologie de la réalité sociale. Réponse à Barry Smith, Pierre Livet (Traducteur) , Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2000, pp.201-208
3 - John Searle, The Construction of Social Reality, New York, Free Press, 1995, p. 35

institutional fact". Then he makes his second move, and presents the problematic question: "If "social facts in general, and institutional facts especially, are hierarchically structured, Institutional facts exist, so to speak, on top of brute physical facts[1]...We therefore need to figure out how social reality fits into our overall ontology, i.e. how the existence of social facts relates to other things that exist?"[2].

The answer of the question is: "there are portions of the real world, objective facts in the world, that are only facts by human agreement. In a sense there are things that exist only because we believe them to exist[3]". And here where he introduces the notion of collective intentionality., which lies at the very heart of his ontology of social and institutional facts: social reality shall originate from collective intentionality[4].

Collective intentions, or "we-intentions" is a key notion in **Searle's** definition of social institutions, and they presuppose the existence of individual intentions, or "I-intentions," but the we-intentions are held only by individuals, they are not reducible to I-intentions; in other words, a we-intention is not merely the sum of a certain number of I-intentions[5]. In other words, it is not be necessary, as **Searle** repeatedly asserts, to *consciously* have in mind the others and their intentions. For **Searle**, A collective intention is, a mental state shared by several people (at least two) connecting them with each other in one way or another. These intentions express the ability of actors to behave cooperatively and to share the same intentions[6].

Searle insisted here: if social facts presupposes collective intentions to exist, institutional facts which is subset of social facts requires more, namely the collective attribution of functions and the collective acceptance of constitutive rules[7]. **Searle** explains: "Similarly, there are enormous differences between baseball games, twenty-

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1 - ibid

2 - Stephan Zimmermann : Is Society Built on Collective Intentions? A Response to Searle, 57 │ : social objects from intentionality to documentality, 2014, pp.121-141

3 - John Searle, The Construction of Social Reality, New York, Free Press, 1995.

4 - John R. Searle : Social Ontology: Some Basic Principles, Papers 80, 2006 51-71

5 - ibid

6 - intentions refers to mental states such as beliefs, desires, emotions, perceptions, action plans in which someone is, when he is directed to something theoretical or a rather practical attitude.

7 - John R. Searle: Social Ontology: Some Basic Principles, Papers 80, 2006 51-71

dollar bills, and national elections, but the underlying logical structure is the same. All three consist of the imposition by collective intentionality of status functions. To describe the basic structure of social-institutional reality, we need exactly three primitives, collective intentionality, the assignment of function, and constitutive rules and procedures"[1].

Society then, is the result of a stipulated process, it can be explained in terms of institutional facts, and institutional facts arise out of collective intentionality through functions, constitutive rules and procedures. **Searle** has summarised this connection between collective intentionality, the attribution of functions and constitutive rules which is to be found in all human institutions as such by the handy principle: «X counts as Y in context C»[2].

5-2-3- Maurizio Ferraris social ontology: The ontology of social object.

We have already met **Maurizio Ferraris** previously, now I return to his theory with more details. As mentioned before his magnum opus is: "Documentality: Why It Is Necessary to Leave Traces" published in 2012, in this book in order to determine the essence of social reality **Ferraris** builds his argument on very deliberate investigation. Here I expose the main steps he takes to establish his ontology of social object. **First**, **Ferraris** set up the role of ontology as cataloguing things that exist or subsist in the "world", which refers to "the totality of individuals: stones, organisms, artefacts and persons both physical and juridical"[3]; **second**, on this basis he affirms that There are three types of objects: natural, ideal, and social: 1- natural objects, which are in space and time independently of the subjects with which they are related; 2- ideal objects, which are not in space, nor are subject to time, and do not depend in any way on the subjects; 3- social objects, which have spatial and time location, and whose existence depends on the subjects[4].

1 - John Searle, The Construction of Social Reality, New York, Free Press, 1995, p. 28.

2 - Barry Smith and John Searle: The Construction of Social Reality: An Exchange, American Journal of Economics and Sociology, 2003, pp.285-309

3 - Tizina Andina : op, cit, pp.89-95

4 - ibid

After that, **Ferraris** emphasize on social object and their essence, and states the following :1-There is nothing (social) outside the text*:* Unlike natural objects, whose existence depends on the material consistency of the objects, social objects exist only if there is a trace that, in some way, performs the act that has brought them into being. A necessary condition for the existence of an object is not only the coming into being of a particular type of action, but also the fact that this action produces a trace in the form of an inscription. That trace is the bearer of a representational act that, in the case of social objects, is the result of a dual action[1].2-Society is not based on communication, but on recording*:* For Ferraris, recording and traces are the conditions of possibility of social reality. The latter exists in relation to the possibility that human beings have to deposit the intentional content of their actions into relatively articulated traces and record them on surfaces that allow one to recall them. In this context **Ferraris** criticize the arguments of Marshall McLuhan who have taken communication as the condition of possibility of the social world. The eminent exemplification of social object is the document, it is in the strong sense, are inscriptions of acts[2]. This was, in brief, the framework of his theory on social object; let's go through some details now.

The Ontology of Social Objects

In respect to these socio-ontological conceptualisations**, Ferraris** attributes to social objects a specific ontology, every social reality is a complex reality that relies necessarily on three tenets: the archetype part, the ectype part and the inscriber. **Ferraris** take marriage as an example: the word marriage refers to the legal institution, the wedding ceremony, and the state that follows from it. The legal institution is the archetype, i.e. the model; the wedding ceremony is the "inscriber", i.e. the act that, accompanied by recording, actualizes the legal institution in the single marriage. The latter, instead, constitutes the ectype[3]. As another example **Ferraris** considers the documents as the eminent social object[4].

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1 - ibid

2 -ibid

3 - Tiziana Andina, op,cit, ibid

4 - For more details about Document as social objet see " Phenomology of documents" pp. 98 In Tiziana's book.

In details, **the archetype** reveals an internal necessity: we may never make a promise in our lives, but if we were to do that, then our promise would necessarily follow the internal structure of the archetypal promise. In the transition from the archetype to **the ectype Ferraris** introduces a third entity: **the inscriber**. Its task is to individualize the act and implement it in the ectype. The inscribers may have different structures (ranging from graduation ceremonies to weddings, allowing for the inscription of the archetypes of social objects "graduation" and "marriage" into documents, to the web as an inscriber whose power and pervasiveness characterize contemporary social reality) and above all, can create social objects[1].

One more feature of social reality which is extremely interesting is the **"autopoietic" capacity of social reality**, which means exactly that There are parts of social reality that social reality itself produces, apparently without any particular foundation or specification[2].

5-2-4-   The relational ontology: Pierpaolo Donati's social ontology

In what follow i focus on the work of **Donati** for he is the founder of the relational sociology, and for he is claiming in several works that his theory is the "real" relational sociology against "the other relational sociologies" that he calls relationist instead[3]. "Relational sociology", then is the approach initiated in Italy in the 1980s by **Pierpaolo Donati**[4], it is a way of observing and thinking that starts from the assumption that the problems of society are generated by social relations and aims to understand, and if possible, solve them, not purely on the basis of individual or voluntary actions, nor conversely, purely through collective or structural ones, but via new social relations and a new articulation of these relations[5].

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1 - Tiziana Andina: op,cit, ibid

2 - Tiziana Andinaop,cit, p . 95

3 - For Donati these theories are in fact "figurational," "transactional," purely communicative and/or in one way or another "reductionist"

4 - Donati Pierpaolo : Manifesto for a critical realist relational sociology, International Review of Sociology, , pp.1-26, 2015

5 - Pierpaolo Donati : 'Relational versus Relationist Sociology: A New Paradigm in the Social Sciences.' in Elżbieta Hałas, Pierpaolo Donati (eds.), The Relational Turn in Sociology: Implications for the Study of Society, Culture and Persons, special issue "Stan Rzeczy" [State of Affairs], Warsaw, 12, 2017:pp. 15-65.

In respect to this perspective, the main aim of **Donati's relational sociology** is: a- enables us to grasp the reality of social relations on their own terms, and b- that succeeds in defining the object of analysis and of intervention as social relations[1]. Although it is not an easy task to trace every step taken by **Donati** to realize this objective, one thing is sure: His first step was ontological, this is why the focus here will be on this line of analysis, with more or less emphasizing on the epistemological and methodological level when it is necessary.

Donati's relational ontology

On the ontological level, **Margaret Archer** in her description of **Donati's** work says**: Pierpaolo Donati** makes this statement: **"**In the beginning is the relation" his motto and repeats it several times"[2]. This kind of thinking implies that "the relation" doesn't work as "a medium of knowledge or a logical concept, it is the viewpoint from which whoever wants to do a sociological analysis, interpret data, or deal with practical social issues, must define his objects. If the social nature of phenomena is to be captured, every social object can, or rather should, be defined in relational terms"[3]. The first outcome of this conceptualization is that Sociology doesn't study "relations among social realities, but it studies social realities as relations. Or in **Donati'**s words: Society It is not a field or a space where relations happen, it is—not "has"—relations"[4].

Relational sociology then: "has a deeper social ontology because the very existence of the social order is itself relational … social reality is social relationality… the social relation is a 'cause of social reality'. Sociology…is not about 'social facts' but, rather, it sudies 'social facts' as social relations[5], in brief society is based on relationality and by extension 'social facts' are 'social relations'.

This is why according to **Donati**: "Only a social ontology that observes social relations as proper to human beings (different from non-human relations) can

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1 - Pierpaolo Donati : Relational Sociology A new paradigm for the social sciences, Ed Routledge , 2011, pp.120-124

2 - ibid

3 - Pierpaolo Donati : Relational Sociology A new paradigm for the social sciences, Ed Routledge , 2011,p.125

4 - ibid

5 - Margaret Archer : Critical Realism and Relational Sociology, Journal of Critical Realism, 2010, 9:2, 199-207

understand whether, where, and how society exceeds itself beyond the recurring crises it goes through, creating new historical-societal configurations"[1]. So **"Relational** ontology cannot be theorized on the basis of the atomistic 'Homo economicus' or 'homo sociologicus' but only in terms of 'homo relatus'[2].

But One thing worth noting here: this statement goes with an epistemological position that sees the social as not a presentation of individuals nor as a holistic entity[3]. **Donati** describes this sort of epistemological positioning a "critical relational realism" or just "relational realism", a realism that is analytical, critical and relational. On this point **Margaret Archer** makes a peculiar remark: **Donati's** realist enterprise converge with critical realism epistemology on three levels: "First, both are strongly committed to emergence and to the importance of emergent properties and powers in explanatory accounts of the social order. Second, both endorse the 'three pillars' of realism: a stratified social ontology, epistemological relativity, and judgemental rationality. Third, they conjointly deny Anthony Giddens's view that 'social relationships … [are] abstractions from our repetitive or routinized behaviour' based on rule-following, which has priority and indispensability for our relations"[4].

Building on this conceptions, social relations seem to have an existence sui generis, seem to possess a logic of their own, they "are not a simple derivative of something else, but constitute a proper order of reality with its own internal strata, each of which requires particular attention and theoretical and practical treatment"[5]. In more details, "the reality of relations does not exclude other "forces" in the spheres of human activity, but rather transforms these forces into elements of relations, which are relevant in as much as they are related with other elements … A human being as a generator of

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1 - Donati Pierpaolo : Manifesto for a critical realist relational sociology, International Review of Sociology , ibid

2 - Margaret S. Archer : in Relational Sociology A new paradigm for the social sciences, Pierpaolo Donati First published 2011, Routledge, forword

3 - Pierpaolo Donati (2017). 'Relational versus Relationist Sociology: A New Paradigm in the Social Sciences.' in "Stan Rzeczy" [State of Affairs], Warsaw, 12, p.20

4 - Margaret Archer : Critical Realism and Relational Sociology, Journal of Critical Realism, 9:2,2010, 199-207

5 - - Pierpaolo Donati : Relational Sociology A new paradigm for the social sciences, op, cit

relations does not act as a free ego; and even if one thinks so, it is rather a function of relative self-reliance and social competences or advantages in a particular sphere"[1].

This means that Sociology should study the social not as a system, nor as the product of individual action but as projection of the relationality created by individuals. This view when converging with critical realism means that social relation cannot be reduced to a symbolic mediation, a projection of individuals, or the expression of structures. It is something more and different. "Social relation is an invisible but real entity, which cannot be treated as a thing Social relation instead is a peculiar effect of mutuality between the terms that it links"[2].

Donati's relational sociology

Sociologically, **Donati** considers two levels on which sociological work can focuses: a) On the first, most elementary level, relations are observed but they are analysed by looking at one factor or variable ; b) On the second, reflexive level, what is to be observed are not the single factors within the relation but rather the reality (the dynamic structure) of the relations as such; as a matter of fact, once relations have been brought into stable existence, they have their own autonomy, so that concrete entities, such as the historical products of society, including institutions, can be observed and interpreted as relational networks stemming from a relationally contested social context[3].

But because social reality is hard to grasp for "relationality exists not only at the social level, but also in the interconnections between the other levels of reality—biological, psychic, ethical, political, and economic. Therefore, in adopting the relational perspective, the first assumption is that the observer should situate himself at an invisible but nonetheless real level of reality, for which the relation is a third

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1 - Aleksander Manterys: Relational sociology paradigms, A New Paradigm in the Social Sciences.' in "Stan Rzeczy" [State of Affairs], Warsaw, 12, pp. 77-97

2 - Donati Pierrpaolo: Donati Pierpaolo : Manifesto for a critical realist relational sociology, International Review of Sociology , op,cit.

3 - ibid

element"[1], we have to determine the real reality of being in relation before starting any kind of sociological inquiry.

According to **Donati**, the notion of the social relation is in the core of the theory, prior to the concept of social system and social action. Why such radical position? Here we have to know What is the reality of a social relation for Donati? What is its real essence? **Donati** in answering the question assumes that a social relation is not a logical relation, nor a psychic one. A social relation is distinguished from logical and/or psychic relations in that for it:

refers, i.e., makes symbolic references (refero);

connects or structurally binds (religo);

and in being an emergent stemming from the reciprocal action of mutual

interaction[2].

The relation: "is made up of diverse components which can be further distinguished by the effect of ego on the other (consistency in the behaviour of the ego towards others), the other on ego (the responsiveness of a person to different egos), and the effect of their interaction (the behaviour that none of the actors 'brings' to the relation, but which results from their mutual conditioning of each other). These effects can be observed and measured, given suitable methods. The first two effects can be analysed at the level of the individual, the third can only be examined by taking the relation as the unit of analysis[3]".

Now let's follow the logic of **Donati's** argument in building his sociological theory:

First, in order to be really relational, we have to take the social relation as the basic unit of analysis. But this does not mean replacing the concept of the individual or the system with that of the relation. On the contrary, this move is useful for better elucidating what are an individual and a system from the sociological viewpoint. Being

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1 - Pierpaolo Donati : 'Relational versus Relationist Sociology: A New Paradigm in the Social Sciences.' in Elżbieta Hałas, op,cit

2 - Pierpaolo Donati (2017). 'Relational versus Relationist Sociology: A New Paradigm in the Social Sciences.' in "Stan Rzeczy" [State of Affairs], Warsaw, 12, ibid

3 - Pierpaolo Donati : Relational Sociology A new paradigm for the social sciences, Ed Routledge , 2011,op,cit

relational is inherent to the make-up of social reality. It proceeds from relatively autonomous theoretical aspects, including intermediate, methodological ones, to empirical facts and back, in a continuous reflexive process between different passages and phases[1].

Second, we have to ascribe agency to both individuals and structures. The two form a society, working in between, and generating social relations. This is not a singular act and its arena is not a purely virtual domain of theoretical thinking. Instead, the historically and situationally variable reality of human life, being the locus for the creation of social relations, is emergent in character, at least in the sense of the arising of individual/collective conscience, trust, social solidarity, sensations of togetherness, or collective action. This leads to the appearance of relatively autonomous relational structures; irreducible to their sources[2].

Third, we have to introduce a new concept in the toolbox, that is: **relational subject**, which is defined as: "The term 'relational subject' indicates individual and social subjects in that they are 'relationally constituted', that is, in as much as they acquire qualities and powers through their internal and external social relations. The term 'relational subject' refers to both the individual subject and the collective (social) subject as regards the role that the relation with the Other plays in defining and redefining one's own identity, whether personal (the identity that the I has of itself) or social (the identity that the I has for Others)"[3]. Obviously, this comes about in different ways depending on whether the subject is individual or collective. The term **'social subject'** indicates "a collective subject in that it is constituted by internal relations between individuals that form part of it, and by the external relations that it has in as much as it is expressed in a 'We'. We have a 'relational social subject' when this We is configured as a relation (We-relation)"[4].

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1 - Pierpaolo Donati : Relational Sociology A new paradigm for the social sciences, op, cit, pp.120-124

2 - Donati Pierpaolo:. Manifesto for a Critical Realist Relational Sociology, "Inter- national Review of Sociology", vol. 25(1), 2015, pp. 86–109.

3 - Donati Pierpaolo: The 'Relational Subject' According to a Critical Realist Relational Sociology, in Journal of Critical Realism, August 2016, pp. 1-26

4 - ibid

Fourth, following **Margaret Archer's** social theory we cannot have a real relational sociology unless we see the social relation as an emergent effect of a process of social morphogenesis[1], social morphogenesis is "a term that comes from the Greek, literally means a change in form or shape. Although its original usage was in biology, morphogenesis was picked up as a term for social change by social systems theorists, who at that time thought biological models might also be appropriate to society[2]". It is a form of surplus of society with respect to itself. In order to understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to invoke **Margaret Archer** who "gave the term new currency in social theory by using morphogenesis to identify a realist approach to the structure agency problem as distinct from the then more prominent approach of Giddensian structuration theory. As Archer conceptualized it, morphogenesis depicts a dialectical relation between structure and agency that, in contradistinction to structuration theory, does not conflate the two. So conceptualized, morphogenesis also departs from social systems theory, which generally represents a variety of social holism that leaves individual agents entirely out of account[3]." And because this morphogenetic surplus is the product of emergent relational effects, the morphogenetic approach tries to detect and analyse every order of emergent properties that condition social action and outcomes at different levels of social reality whenever emergence can be observed.

Fifth, we have to go beyond Parsons's functionalist model, which means that "relational sociology" is a reformulation of the four-patterned AGIL (Adaptation; Goal attainment; Integration; Latency or Latent pattern maintenance) scheme in Talcott Parsons' social theory. For **Donati**, AGIL is not just an analytical tool to detect social actions or facts, it is the "molecule" of the social itself, it transfers the socio-ontological questions from the individual being to the "relations". The relation is thus both "structure" and "event": the first locution is defined by religo and refero, that are,

1 - For more details see: Margaret S. Archer: Social Morphogenesis and the Prospects of Morphogenic Society, in in Social Morphogenesis, Editor Margaret S. Archer, Springer, 2013, pp.1-22

2 - Douglas V. Porpora: Morphogenesis and Social Change, in Social Morphogenesis, Editor Margaret S. Archer, Springer, 2013, pp.25-37

3 - ibid

respectively, the A-I and G-L axis in the AGIL scheme; the second one is defined by the morphogenetic dimension of social facts[1].

Donati's conceptualization of society

Now**, what Donati's** calls 'society', on the basis of his critical realism approach, is not a more or less orderly, more or less conflictual collection of agents/actors (whether individual or collective) that share an arena of actions and interact with their mutual expectations over time[2]. The basic idea here is that society is not a space containing relations, or an arena where relations are played. It is rather the very tissue of relations. Relations are the very stuff of what we call 'the social'[3]. Sociology then has to examine and determine sociological categories in terms of social morphogenesis. Relations are effects of actors' agency, but at the same time they constitute the irremovable fabric of their experiences, and real objects of references to the world and other actors. Situations represent the arena of morphogenesis, real "clusters" of relations, without which the autonomy of individuals would be enclosed in solipsistic delusional self-references[4].

For **Donati** society is made by individuals but is not made of individuals. Certainly, only individuals can activate it, but society is another thing with respect to what individuals are and carry in society. Society belongs to an order of reality that is relational, which is to say, the reality of concrete social relations. In other words, society can be viewed as created in groups of actors sharing areas of activities, entering interactions, and similarly defining events[5], it is that order of reality that consists in the configuration that agents/ actors give to their relations when they recognize themselves

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1 - Davide Ruggieri: Georg Simmel and the "Relational Turn". Contributions to the foundation of the Lebenssoziologie since Simmel, Simel studies, Volume 21, numéro 1, 2017, pp.1-30

2 - Pierpaolo Donati: Manifesto for a critical realist relational sociology, International Review of Sociology, 2015, pp. 1-26

3 - Donati Pierpaolo: "Differently from other approaches named relational as well, this theory assigns to the social relation neither an ideational nor a materialistic character, nor a mixing of ideal and material elements, and does not reduce it to a pure exchange or transaction. " in "The 'Relational Subject' According to a Critical Realist Relational Sociology, in Journal of Critical Realism, August 2016, pp. 1-26

4 - Aleksander Manterys: Relational sociology paradigms, A New Paradigm in the Social Sciences.' in "Stan Rzeczy" [State of Affairs], Warsaw, 12, op,cit, pp.82-90

5 - ibid

in their belonging to a ' We ' (the We-relation) that delimits (defines the boundaries of) a certain social sphere that has ' super-functional ' qualities and properties[1].

5-2-5-   Tony Lawson 's social ontology

Tony Lawson in his impressive and splendid work: **"The nature of social reality**", asks right from the beginning: why social ontology is relevant, important and inescapable to social research?[2] The project of the book is not simplistic: If the social world is real, if there are out their entities that we call social realities, what are then their mode of existence? How could we identify Their features? What are some of the mechanisms and causal powers that constitute the workings of these social entities? How to elaborate objective conceptualisations about these entities?[3].

Although it is not easy to grasp every dimension of **Tony Lawson's** sociological project, it is fortunately possible to expose the main tenets of the ontological part of this project, even if it is clear that philosophical issue is not the only concern of the book, Not just on the theoretical level but when we intend to do social interventions as well:

"My motivation in writing the book is far from that of elaborating an account that is without relevance to, or has no bearing upon, projects of social intervention. On the contrary, I take the view that social ontology and its results are *especially* vital to such concerns and shall be suggesting that if practically oriented projects are to be successful, they more or less *require* an explicit attention to social ontology and its results"[4].

Cleary what is expressed here is related to the idea that the kind of ontology the reader will encounter in the text has nothing to do with the speculations or purely metaphysical issues.

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1 - Pierpaolo Donati: Manifesto for a critical realist relational sociology, International Review of Sociology, 2015, pp. 1-26

2 - Tony Lawson : The nature of social reality : Issues in social ontology, Routledge,2019

3 - Tony Lawson: "Ontology and the study of social reality: emergence, organisation, community, power, social relations, corporations, artefacts and money," Cambridge Journal of Economics, Oxford University Press, vol. 36(2), 2012, pp. 345-385.

4 - Tony Lawson : The nature of social reality : Issues in social ontology, Routledge,2019, introductin

Social ontology and social reality in Lawson's project

The analysis of **Tony's** work will focus on his theorisation of the basic nature and structure of social world, as well as his new conceptualisation or reconstruction of the main issues that i have discussed before. But some basic definitions are necessary to better understand the theory.

The first notion is: **Ontology.** To **Lawson** the term refers to the study of being, and it includes at least the following: 1) The study of what is, or what exists, including the study of the nature of specific existents; 2) The study of how existents exist[1]. The second is: **Social domain**, which refers to all "phenomena, existents, properties, etc., (if any) whose formation/coming into existence and/or continuing existence necessarily depend at least in part upon human beings and their interactions. The predicate 'social' thus signifies membership of that realm or domain[2]." Thus, **"Social reality"** is already there, it is somehow present and given to us in every moment. The social comprises all those phenomena whose existence depends necessarily on our existence as human being.

So, the category we called: **the social**, **really exists**. There are no doubts about that, what its mode of existence? Its "essence"? What is the social per se? What are the properties of all the social kind? These are questions of another nature; they belong to the realm of social ontology. **Social ontology according to Lawson** is meant the study of the social realm in every aspect and types of social reality. In other words, it is meant to re-build and re-conceptualise notions like: institution, social fact, social object, money, state, corporation, social structure, groups, organisation, community, power, and so. Now what are the basic principles of Lawson's social ontology? What is **Lawson's social reality**?

Social reality's mode of being according to Lawson

As mentioned several times in his works, **Lawson** makes a methodological distinction between socio-philosophical ontology , which is concerned with features

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1 - Tony Lawson: A conception of social ontology, Social Ontology and Modern Economics, Ed by Stephen Pratten, op, cit , 2015, pp.19-52

2 - ibid

that hold or operate throughout the social domain − that is, features of social being per se, that comprise basic principles according to which social reality is everywhere constituted , and socio-scientific ontology which refers to how particular outcomes or social existents (money, markets, cities, corporations, technology, gender, universities) are formed, based on, or in line with, the more general features elaborated within philosophical ontology[1].

On the basis of this distinction **Lawson** develops a conception of social reality in relation with these fundamentals' features.

Social reality is structured: "that is, it is irreducible to any one ontological realm, such as that of actualised practices. In particular it is constituted in part by social rules". By a social rule **Lawson** understands "a generalised procedure of action or way of doing things"[2].

Social reality is highly interconnected: which mean it is relational, with aspects constituted through their relations to other aspects, resulting in emergent totalities. Social phenomena are found everywhere to be relationally constituted, what characterise this relational aspect is the existence of internal social relations and external ones. For **Lawson** Two objects or aspects are said to be externally related if neither is constituted by the relationship in which it stands to the other[3].

Social reality is ontologically intrinsically dynamic: Social life is inherently processual, it is always in a state of permanent process of social transformation, these social dynamics are manifested in all social structures being reproduced or transformed through human. Social reality then everywhere is subject to a transformative process activated repeatedly through the sum total of our individual. On the basis of that, social structures for example exist as processes of reproduction and transformation. This is **their mode of being.** Here there is no aspects that are fixed and out of time, there is no ontological prioritisation of continuity over change, the same

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1 - Tony Lawson: A conception of social ontology, Social Ontology and Modern Economics, Ed by Stephen Pratten, op, cit , 2015, pp.19-52

2 - Tony Lawson: What is an institution, Social Ontology and Modern Economics, Ed by Stephen Pratten 2015, pp.553-577

3 - ibid

social logic determines continuity and change, somehow, they are the same thing the same thing[1].

Social reality is an Emergent totality: A final fundamental category of the ontological conception I am laying out is that of emergence. Reality can be said to be emergent, or as possessing emergent powers, if there is a sense in which it: 1 - has arisen out of a lower stratum, being formed by principles operative at the lower level; and 2- remains dependent on the lower stratum for its existence; 3 - contains causal powers of its own which are both irreducible to those operating at the lower level and (perhaps) capable of acting back on the lower level[2].

The Non-social world as a part of the social world or when the social

is not necessarily human.

Tony Lawson asserts that inanimate objects can also acquire social existence, Many objects in specific contexts, when they are positioned within a social system take on the identity of cash, passports or identity cards, deeds of ownership, wedding rings, etc., But obviously under the community acceptance[3].**Lawson** define **"Positions"** in his **theory of social positioning**[4]as such: they are : 1-typically purposive , exist for some reason, though this is not the same as they've just functional ion ; 2- positions are usually named (have designations) and facilitate the formation of social identities and may involve associative markers (passports, wedding rings etc.); 3- occupants typically have pre-existent characteristics or capacities that enable or fit the position, but are also granted additional powers or capacities in virtue of the existence of the position[5]. In the case of inanimate objects when they are socially positioned, the capacities or powers associated with their positioning take the form not of rights and obligations but of system functions especially.

The causality issue: from the logic of emergence to the logic of organisation

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1 -ibid

2 - ibid

3 - Tony Lawson: A conception of social reality, op,cit, pp.1-29

4 - Jamie Morgan :Review essay Tony Lawson, economics and the real-world economics review, issue no. 91, March 2020, pp. 132-145

5 - Tony Lawson: op, cit, pp.31-73

The aim of this section is to analyse how **Lawson** has adressed the question of causation in social theory and what was his response to: "**The reductionism problem"** or simply put: what happened exactly when moving from the individual dimension to the community dimension social structure, and from the latter to the state dimension? What are the essence of these mode of transition?

The keys to answer this question according to **Lawson** are to be found in two logics: the logic of emergence, concept that we have encounter before, and the logic of organisation. Let me elaborate.

According to **Lawson** social reality everywhere is characterized by specific processes of emergence. In general, "an emergent entity is generally held to be composed out of elements which lie at a different (lower) level of reality to itself, but which, in a given context, have (perhaps through being modified) become organised as components of the emergent (higher level) entity or causal totality. Emergence, then, as widely interpreted, is ultimately a compositional term, and one that involves components being organised (rather than aggregated)"[1].

More clearly, emergence "is simply a term that expresses the appearance of novelty, or something previously absent or unprecedented. [...] So understood the term itself indicates nothing about how higher-level entities bearing causal powers have come into being. Nor in and of itself does it imply anything about any relationship that might hold between the causal powers of the higher level (emergent) entity and those of its components[2]. So, for **Lawson,** social reality is somehow made up of levels or layers of emergent social entities**,** every emergent totality is a novel social reality, the problem here is: what is the cause of the continuity in the process of the permanent "genesis" of social realities? Why it seems that this process of transformation or the re-production happens smoothly and in continuity?

In respect to this question, **Lawson** argue that the logic of emergence is not enough to explain the mode of transition from lower level of reality to more higher and

1 - Tony Lawson: Emergence and social causation: Published in John Greco and Ruth Groff (eds.), Powers and Capacities in Philosophy, London and New York: Routledge, 2013,pp. 2-3

2 - Lawson, Tony: Emergence and morphogenesis: Causal reduction and downward causation? Ed: M. S. Archer, Social morphogenesis, Dordrecht: Springer, 2013, pp. 61–85.

complicated one, so we need to introduce another category to better seize the essence of social causality, the concept here is organisation, and the idea is that in order to move from the micro to the macro structure, any emergent level of social reality come into existence by the social logic of the organisation of the micro parts in the social world. Simply put, the forms that take the organisation of the lower levels become the generator of the higher level.

The idea here is clear, to better understand the relations between micro and macro structure in the theory we should set in mind that the central concept of the theory is not emergence as claimed by John Searle[1]. The central concept in the contrary is **organisation** and its consequences. Now in **Lawson** words:

 "Why do I not consign the organisation of the elements along with the latter to the 'base'? My answer is simply because the organising structure is, and is always, itself an emergent. Whether the focus is on the formation of physical liquids or solids, or social artefacts [...], the totality emerges along with, and through the emergence of, its organising structure[2]".

In other words, social causality works on the basis of an emergent entity's organising structure: "Specifically, along with the emergence of an entity or whole and its 'global' powers of efficient causation, emerges the entity's organising structure. Though the entity as a whole and its structure appear on the scene simultaneously, they are not identical, the emergent structure clearly being a property of the emergent whole[3]", which means that new levels or plateaus of social realities emerge through the relational organisation of the pre-existing elements, the cause behind this is that the pre-existing elements become relationally organised in a specific form or forms, and thus bring into being novel phenomena.

Lawson by using the analogy of the organisation process in building a house details more his idea:

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1 - Yannick Slade‑Caffarel Organisation, Emergence and Cambridge Social Ontology, Journal of Theory Social Behavior. 2020; 50:391—408

2 - Lawson Tony: Some critical issues in social ontology: Reply to John Searle. Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour, 46.4, 2016e,pp .426—437

3 - Tony Lawson: Emergence and social causation, in Powers and Capacities in Philosophy, Routledge, 2012

"Consider the construction of a house out of such components as bricks, mortar, wood, panes of glass, cement, etc. At any stage in the process of construction an observer will find not only the part of the building constructed so far, formed out of various components, but also the relational organisation of the latter components. And this organisation will be essential to the former construction. As the house is completed, so is the relational organisation of the house's components. The two –the totality and the organisational structure emerge simultaneously. Both are causal, but in different ways. The house has the power to provide safety and shelter, to facilitate family or other indoor activities, to be bought and sold, and so on. The arrangement of the parts makes the house feasible. The latter is a form of formal causation[1].

One direct result of this social ontological conception is **Lawson's** elaboration of a precise, logic and real conception of some social categories like: social systems, collectivities social groups, money and institution. **Lawson** on the basis of all the different features of social reality considers that because social structures exist as processes of reproduction and transformation, this being their mode of existence, a social group or collectivity can be understood as consisting in, or depending upon, or as a set of people distinguishable by, their current occupancy of a specific set of social positions[2]. Collectivities on the other way exist as an ensemble of networked, internally related positions with their associated rules and practices. And because a social system is conceived as a structured process of interaction, then "categories" : economy, the state, corporations[3], trade unions, households, schools and so on, can be recognised as depending upon, presupposing or consisting in networked internally related position-rule systems associated rules and practices, finally "Institutions are particular forms of emergent social phenomena, mostly social systems, or structured processes of interaction, that are either intended to be(whether or not they are), or are discovered a posteriori to be and are recognised as, relatively enduring"[4].

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1 - ibid

2 - Tony Lawson: what is an institution, op,cit, pp.553-572

3 - Tony Lawson: The Nature of the Firm and the Peculiarities of the Corporation',. Cambridge Journal of Economics, 39(1): (2015), pp.1–32.

4 - Tony Lawson : What is an institution, op,cit.

6- Conclusion

The last few years have seen a surge of interest in social ontology, in this article I attempted to show that, in relation to sociology, this ontological turn is a response to some epistemological, methodological, conceptual and practical problems, as well as contradictions that arise as sociology faces new challenges. The article suggests that social ontology open new avenues and perspectives to address these challenges and presents indeed a condition of possibility that is necessary to overcome the crisis of sociology. The article, also defends the idea that considers any attempt to avoid ontological issues in sociology counterproductive. The reason for that is simple, every response to the crisis has failed because whatever were the diagnoses of this sociological crisis, sociologists have mistakenly turned their critical sights toward methods and methodological issues having in mind theories and methods in physics or biology as the best example of a good scientific theory. With the return to social ontological investigation, it appears that sociologists have found the right direction. At the end, progress of sociology, is not taking place without some kind of return to the beginnings of sociology and without raising difficult questions about the nature and structure of its objects of study.

Now, there is no doubt amongst sociologists, social scientists in general, about the important role of social ontology in social research, it is even required, before starting any research to establish first its ontological premises on every stage of scientific inquiry, that is in theory and in practice. The social ontological models and theories represented in this article are examples of the "open possibilities" and diverse perspectives that social ontology can offer for the benefit of sociological research.

But there is another side of this ontological turn. Social ontology is in deep a liberating exercise. Given that Science is not only "about science", which means that science has often a hidden political aspect, we could say that the "sociology" we are dealing with is somehow "an effect of power, a grid of inequality and domination, or, at the very least, it is the product of strategic machinations that are driven by motives other than discovering the truth"[1]. The consequences of such situation are: 1- "A

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1 - George Steinmetz : politics of methods, op,cit, PP.44-45

certain 'methodological nationalism', which takes two forms. One is a tendency to generalize from one's own country. The other is the myth of exceptionalism, according to which one's own country is the exception to the general rules of development and thus deserving of particular interest"[1]; 2- when politics is prior than science in universities, departments, magazines, and journals sociologists face a condition of "violating the liberal self-understanding of science…and this situation could easily reflect an epistemological unconscious, that is: some fundamental assumptions which adherents of all the variant systems within the epoch unconsciously presuppose[2]" In brief, what does this mean? Simply put, the social ontological project is also a decolonial project that can transform what exactly sociology is and what can be, far from the western hegemony[3], but this is another story.

1 - Donatella Della Porta and Michael Keating: Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences A Pluralist Perspective, op,cit, pp. 1-17

2 - George Steinmetz : op, cit, pp.44-45

3 - Hwansuk Kim: Decolonization and the Ontological Turn of Sociology, journal of Asian Sociology Vol. 48, No. 4 ,December 2019, pp. 443-454

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